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Film director teaches art of action genre

Apr 27,2006

For years, action flicks were not a popular genre in contemporary Korean cinema. They became even less so when Hong Kong gangster movies, which dominated the local film scene from the mid '80s, were able to provide just about all the action that local audiences craved.

Director Ryoo Seung-wan is from that generation and responsible for a new esthetic of "arthouse action" — a merging of comic action scenes and film noir.

"In essence, I dislike violence," explained Ryoo, the director of "Arahan" and "Crying Fist," when he was accused of promoting violence in his films. "The only reason I am drawn to violence is because of the cinematic pleasure it provides. I am turned on by the bold body movements, the splashing blood and its fresh sounds in a film. For me, it's the action, not the violence, that matters."

"Anatomy of Violence: Ryoo Seung-wan's Action School" is a special program organized by the Seoul Art Cinema to better understand the art of action filmmaking.

For the program, Ryoo has selected 10 films to screen and discuss with participants, including five of his own works.

Perhaps Ryoo's distinct path through life helped to shape his career as a director whose work is increasingly coveted by the younger crowd in Korea.

Ryoo became his family's sole breadwinner after he lost his parents while in middle school. He later dropped out of high school to work as a production assistant on the film "Saminjo" by Park Chan-wook, whom he admires as his "cinematic mentor."

Ryoo filmed his debut feature at the age of 27. "Die Bad" consists of four separate episodes dealing with a teenage gangster. It illustrated the obvious passion of the independent director.

He cast his younger brother Ryoo Seung-beom as a lead, and also featured him in his other films, helping make the younger Ryoo a top movie star.

Indeed, "Die Bad," which was shot on 16-millimeter film for a cost of 65 million won ($68,625), set the standard for Korean "B-movies." The genre hardly existed after Park's disastrous failures prior to his breakthrough "Joint Security Area" taught local producers that B-movies don't sell well in Korea.

"Die Bad" caused a sensation in Korean cinema. It was stylish, without losing its edge. In a rare case for a film shot in 16 mm, the movie was released in a theater as well as attracting rave reviews from critics after a premiere at the Jeonju International Film Festival in 2000.

Having earned the nickname of the "Korean Tarantino," Ryoo's film career has begun to take off lucratively, taking him from his digital short "Dachimawa Lee" — a stylish homage to the Korean B-rated action flicks of the '60s — to his first full-fledged commercial movie about a tough female taxi driver stealing mob money, "No Blood No Tears," in 2002.

"Arahan," his next feature in 2004, was a playful remake of a Korean animated film about martial arts masters. "Crying Fist," released last year, dealt with amateur boxers trying to compensate for pasts they regretted and was a well-made human melodrama seasoned with action scenes.

The Seoul Art Cinema program will also feature classic film noir and comic action movies that influenced the director's cinematic taste as a teenager, including John Woo's "A Better Tomorrow," "Mean Streets" and "Raging Bull" by Martin Scorsese and "Project A," directed by and starring Jackie Chan.

The mixture, indeed, presents an amusing reflection of Ryoo's varied cinematic interests. He has often described himself "a Jackie Chan Kid" who grew up devouring acrobatic Kung Fu flicks by the actor. Many critics contend that his films possess a sensibility of action closer to that of Martin Scorsese.

by Park Soo-mee

"Anatomy of Violence" runs through May 5th at Seoul Art Cinema.
The admission is 6,000 won.
To get to the theater, take exit 5 at Jongno 3-ga (line 3), and walk toward Nakwon Arcade.
For more information, call 741-9782.

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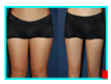

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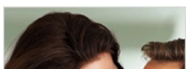

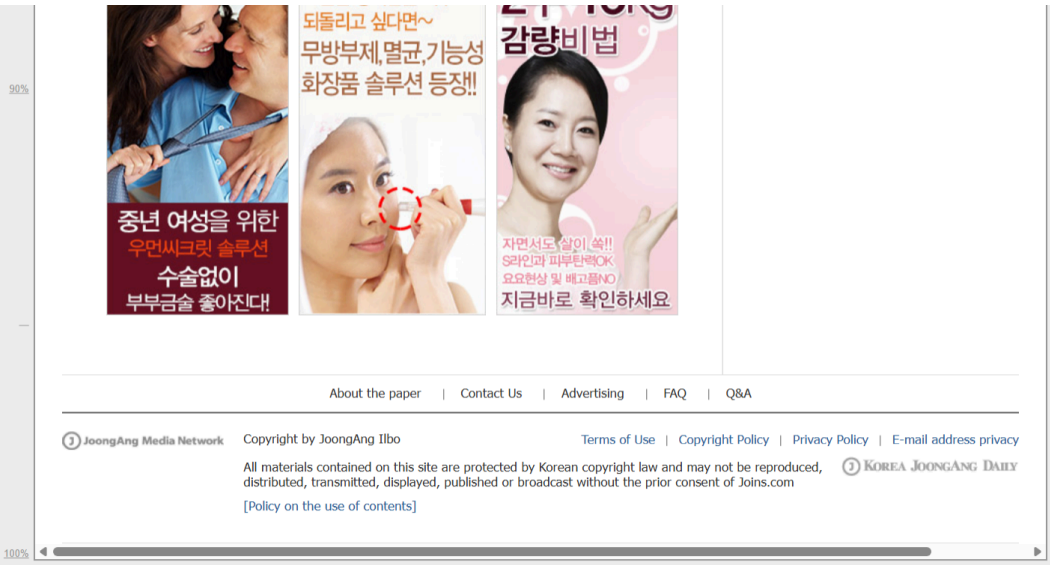
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